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ABSTRACT

After specifying dimensions of negative emotion associated with child care program and staff evaluation, this discussion describes three aspects of a complete evaluation process: communication climate, evaluation tools, and procedures for evaluation. It is asserted that creating a trusting atmosphere is the key to effective evaluation; administrator behaviors thought to facilitate openness among staff members are described. In addition, desirable characteristics of written evaluation forms are specified, and four steps of the evaluation process are outlined: preparation, evaluation conference, follow-up, and staff evaluation of the director. Suggestions concerning termination of employees are briefly offered. It is concluded that the once-dreaded chore of evaluation can become a helpful tool of staff development. (RH)

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FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE CHILD CARE CENTER:

It's Staff Evaluation Time!

Kathy Modigliani, Former Director Pound House Children's Center

And The Child Care Employee Project

Both directors and staff approach evaluation with dread. Directors may feel that there is a little benefit gained from this time consuming, often painful process. Employees may feel that their raises or promotions will be threatened by a process they judge subjective and unfair. Ultimately, many staff minimize and endure evaluation, and directors perform this duty in a perfunctory way, or just avoid it altogether.

Why is it that staff evaluation—one of the best opportunities to improve staff performance and communication—is so often feared, resented and avoided? What can turn it into a satisfying, constructive and educational task?

Negative Aspects of Evaluation

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Most people harbour strong negative feeling about being evaluated. Oten these feelings are based on past experiences where feedback has meant criticism. Some common reactions are:

- Fear of facing one's own inadequacy: "I know I'm not perfect, but I don't like to admit it to myself, much less have others focus on it."

- Shame: "I don't want to think about my inadequacies and how I disappoint the children, parents and my co-workers."

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- Resentment of being judged: "The director doesn't appreciate me and the pressures I am under. Besides, she never listens to my feedback, so why should I listen to hers?"

- Fear of change and additional responsibilities: "I'm doing the best I can and I'm already overworked. Why should I do more without receiving more reward?"

- Fear/skepticism about the consequences of evaluation: "Nothing ever changes no matter how much we talk about it. Last time people were evaluated, two staff ended up leaving.

To make evaluation a constructive process, these emotions must be recognized and addressed by both director and staff. Such recognition involves a willingness to change some of the more traditional approaches to evaluation--making it a two way communication between staff and administration.

Where to begin making changes? There are three areas which overlap to form a complete evaluation process: the communication climate, the evaluation tools and the procedures for evaluation. The suggestions which follow emerge from many years of experience at the Pound House Children's Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan and from conversations between many directors and staff and the Child Care Employee Project.

A Climate for Communication

Creating a trusting atmosphere is the key to effective evaluation. Our

interactions with children can serve as a model in this regard. We know that before we can expect a child to change behavior, we must communicate our acceptance and understanding of him/her as a person. And, because of dynamics of power in adult/child relationships, we often anticipate resistance to feedback about behavior. So too with adults. A person who feels appreciated and accepted for who she is will be more open to considering her shortcomings and less defensive about trying new approaches.

Because a director usually holds more power over certain decisions affecting center operation than do other staff (such as, hiring, firing, certain budget allocations etc.), s/he must recognize the importance of her/his role in creating a warm and supportive climate for communication. Certain director behaviors will faciliate openess in staff:

- Prior to beginning evaluations, directors can faciliatate cooperation by acknowledging the unpleasant and scary aspects of the process. Asking staff to air their negative feelings and to make concrete suggestions to improve the process can go a long way toward making evaluation meaningful.

- Directors can alleviate many fears and rumors surrounding evaluation by clearly spelling out the consequences of the process. Let people know if and how their evaluation will effect pay increases, promotions, future letters of recommendation, etc. Assurance that punishment will never be a consequence of participation in the process is essential. The more that evaluation can be used as a form of feedback and professional growth rather than as a measure of performance for receiving better compensation, the more likely people will engage in a fruitful exchange. In some centers, a simple checklist is kept of

behaviors necessary for receiving raises (being on time, taking needed courses etc.). Monetary rewards are then based on easily observed behaviors; evaluation is reserved for in-depth discussion of professional growth

- Directors can make employees more comfortable with accepting and giving feedback if they guarantee absolute confidentiality in the evaluation process. This means staff can be assured that their performance will only be discussed if they raise it as an issue; it won't be public information.

- Directors who are willing to listen to criticism serve as a good role model for staff. To faciliatate this process it is essential that a director never become vindictive in response to negative feedback and that a clear mechanism is established for staff to give the director feedback. The director should follow through on suggestions, acknowledging her willingness to consider new approaches and sharing her decision to change (or not to change) her behavior.

- Directors who exhibit flexibility by not enforcing only one"right way" to do things create an atmosphere where staff feel recognized and supported for their unique contributions. And, by being flexible and open, a director encourages staff to experiment with new approaches. (There will always be situations where a director can't be flexible; in those instances letting staff know reasons for your behavior can stem the tide of dissent).

Evaluation Tools

The use of written forms can make the evaluation process more comfortable for everyone. Forms provide a framework from which to conduct the evaluation, and can minimize misunderstandings. Written forms are not a substitute for discussion, but they are often a good place to start by helping people clarify their thoughts and responses. Written forms can be used for self, peer or supervisory assessment. Additionally, if a director is open to being evaluated by staff, written forms faciliate direct feedback which may be difficult to deliver face to face to the "boss." Some suggestions include:

- Evaluation forms should contain language parallel to that used in the employee's job description. (The job description may have to be developed first, using concrete terms to define the employee's duties and containing specific behavioral objectives). Therefore, performance can be checked against expected duties and responsibilities.

- Evaluation forms should also contain additional items which describe important aspects of the job that are not included in the job description, such as organization, attention to detail, sense of priorities, reliability, punctuality etc. It is important that each of these additional areas have specific definitions in terms of the employee's responsiblities. If employees help develop these forms there is less chance of misunderstandings.

- Open ended questions which illicit individual perceptions and allow an opportunity to raise unmentioned problems and suggestions can enhance the evaluation process. For example: What difficulties or problems do you see in your job or in the center? What practical suggestions for changes would you make to reduce these problems? What aspects of your job do you find most

satisfying and successful? What new skills would you like to acquire during the coming year?

- Written evaluation forms should contain reminders that people's responses will remain confidential. A review of positive ways to phrase feedback will also enhance the effectiveness of the evaluation procedure. It is more effective to say "I feel concerned about the arrangement of art materials in your classroom because it seems hard to find things," than to say "Your room is too sloppy."

Conducting the Evaluation

All employees should know when to expect an evaluation, what procedures will be used and what the anticipated consequences will be. Ideally, evaluations for salary increases and assessment for staff growth and development should be kept separate. Described below are steps taken at Pound House Child Care Center to accomplish effective evaluations.

- Step one: Preparation: Each person to be involved in the evaluation discussion (eg. employee and director) fills out the evaluation form first. It is useful to give each staff member approximately an hour of release time to fill out the form and give it quality thought. Serious self assessment prior to discussion greatly facilitates the evaluation process. A self identified need for improvement is easier to face and work with than one identified by someone else. If both staff and director fill out the forms prior to the meeting, they will be using similar language (and hopefully criteria) in their assessments. (If forms are unavailable or not filled out prior to the meeting, the discussion

should still begin with a leading comment from the director to the staff person, such as "How do you feel about your work during the last month?" or "Before I start, I'd like to hear from you.").

- Step two: Evaluation Conference: This should be conducted during a reasonably long time specifically set aside for this purpose, in a neutral and pleasant place. After the staff person shares her self assessment, the director can provide useful clarification and offer assistance based on her assessment of the staff person. This approach allows the director to be more supportive and less critical than she would be if she had to raise all the problems first. Even still, there may be issues the director wants to raise that were not first raised by the employee. Here it is important to remember that comments should be based on specific observations and examples. Evaluators should take care to identify successes as well as problems, and utilize "I" statements. (For instance, "When you allow your classroom floor to become cluttered with toys, I think it's hard for people to walk through, and I'm afraid someone is going to fall.")

- Step three: Follow-up plans: After discussing the evaluation, the director and employee together can develop a reasonable and manageable plan for change. If the employee's performance has been unsatisfactory in some areas, then these areas for improvement and any probationary period or deadlines must be made specific and clear. Desired improvement should be outlined in the form of specific goals and behaviors in each area, what technical assistance the employee can expect to achieve these goals (eg. coursework, consultants, observation of other programs, etc.) and when the situation will be

reassessed.

- Step four: Director evaluation: Ideally, evaluation should be a mutual process with directors evaluating employees and vice versa. This may be threatening for directors who fear that being evaluated by staff means giving up important authority. However, a receptive director is benefitted as much as anyone else by receiving information about how others perceive her performance. Directors with large staffs may find it impractical and wearing to enter into a mutual evaluation process with each staff member such as described in steps 1-3 above. But some vehicle should be instituted to achieve this part of the evaluation process. (Chris Stafford, a director in Cincinnati, Ohio has developed a short, effective director evaluation form. For a copy write: Chris Stafford, 3639 Wilshire Ave. Cincinnati, Ohio 45208).

Termination

Sometimes, in spite of best efforts, an unsatisfactory employee will need to be fired. After the review process and expiration of a probationary period, one final attempt to understand the problem may be warranted. Before taking action, make sure that the employee understands the problem and changes to be made. Assess whether the problem is a result of cultural or other differences which should be tolerated. Weigh the employee's contribution versus her shortcomings. Finally, look at other options to provide the necessary assistance for the employee to improve her performance. It is often useful to call in an outside evaluator at these times; a consultant may often see aspects of the problem and possible

solutions to which those involved deeply in the situation are blind.

After many attempts to improve the situation, the director may still have to carry out the decision to fire the employee. This is almost always a dificult and sad task. Make sure that the decision is carried out in accordance with the employee's right and privileges in this situation. (Hopefully, your center has a clear grievance procedure and personnel policies which all parties have read and which outlines the termination procedure. Contact the Child Care Employee Project for information about these issues).

Conclusion

The earlier staff problems are identified, the more potential there is for employee success. Evaluations of new employees should be conducted 6-8 weeks after a new worker is hired, and a definite schedule to reassess progress should be set-up. The evaluation process can then become an integrated part of continuing staff development, and anxiety surrounding it can be reduced. And, don't forget those employees who consistently perform well--continuing evaluation helps you acknowledge their contribution and express your appreciation. It also establishes an available mechanism for when problems do arise. (In the midst of great staff tension, it is hard to develop a new procedure!!)

Good evaluation procedures help directors identify employee strengths and use them effectively. They can also strengthen relations among all the people in the center by engaging people in mutual problem solving. Joint efforts create a more effective, involved staff and as committment increases, so may job satisfaction. The once-dreaded chore of evaluation can become a helpful tool of staff development.